

## All roads lead to Damascus

John F. Kennedy's memorable inauguration speech in January 1961 started off with the phrase "We celebrate today not a victory of a party but a celebration of freedom." The unanimous ratification of the European constitutional treaty, barely 24 months after a divisive referendum and electoral campaign on EU membership, enhances our image as a nation.

Those who used to paternalistically comment on the polarized Maltese political situation are now faced with unanimity on the central focus of Malta's foreign policy; certainly a feather in this nation's cap.

At a time when the European electorate – including that of two founding member states – was expressing doubts on the deepening process sanctioned by the European Constitution, the representatives of the Maltese electorate stood in unison to ratify Europe's basic law. From the European state most divided on the European issue, we have evolved into the only EU country which unanimously ratified the EU Constitution.

No more bickering on the *acquis* and its effects on Maltese scenario. The *acquis* is no longer an alien subject, it has become part of us. In ratifying the EU Constitution, the Maltese Parliament has also sanctioned the Athens treaty of accession signed by former Prime Minister Eddie Fenech Adami in April 2003 in the wake of the Nationalist Party's victory at the polls.

In July 2003 the MLP in Parliament had voted against the ratification of the Athens treaty, requesting also a division, in spite of the people's clear verdict at the general election. Thankfully, it has now voted in favour not only of Malta's membership of the EU but also of this deepening process which was anathema to all MLP spokesmen who for years had drummed on the inherent evils of the EU.

In the recent ratification debate, the Labour opposition tried to give the impression that it had single-handedly halted a speed ratification, thus ensuring a proper discussion of the provisions of the constitutional treaty itself. Nothing is further from the truth.

The government deliberately decided to wait for the opposition to stroll on its road to Damascus in order to ensure an unanimous ratification the treaty – a first in Maltese politics and an asset for Malta's image internationally.

Had it wanted to, the government could have pushed through Parliament, on the strength of its healthy majority, the ratification of the treaty, within days of its

signing on October 29, 2004. But following the first signals from the opposite side that the laborious process of concession from outright resistance to acceptance of our EU membership was on the tables Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi acted in states-man-like manner and decided to wait. His patience was rewarded and his party's politics, may I add, vindicated.

Some have remarked that this *volte face* on such a fundamental issue is the fruit of convenience rather than conviction. Indeed the u-turn is impressive. A mass conversion never experienced in recent history. Indeed, nothing like it since the Chinese general who decided to baptize his entire regiment by using a hose-pipe. Be that as it may, the fact remains that we can now face Europe with a more credible and confident attitude, ensuring that the European issue has been finally settled.

It would however be unrealistic to expect the Nationalist Party to remain mute and silent on this remarkable political somersault. After all its long held policy, dating back to February 1979, when the first steps in the long road to membership were taken, has been upheld by the party which opposed it in 1981, 1987, 1992, 1996, 1998 and 2003.

No one should expect the PN not to rejoice in such developments. As has happened on so many other occasions and issues, for example opposition to integration, independence, local government and EU membership, the party has always been found steadfastly on the right side of events and history, absorbing and rightly interpreting the signs of the times. George Borg Olivier's much maligned appeal of "Ejjew maghna" (Join us) has finally been dictated!